

CHARLIE'S PAL, EDGAR

BY GARDNER KISSACK

He must have marveled, flying his daughter in his newest plane over and around California in the late 1940s and early '50s, how far he'd come, how much he had achieved. He had come from a family of humble, hard-working Swedish dairy farmers. He had come to fame and fortune and now, thanks to his wife Frances and their little girl, utter happiness and true joy.

His fortune came mainly from his investment of thirty-five dollars some thirty years earlier. That was the fee a Chicago wood

carver had extracted from Edgar Bergen in 1919 to whittle a figure based on a drawing that Bergen had made of a brassy, red-haired Michigan newsboy. Oh, how he —

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Charlie McCarthy and Edgar Bergen

and they—soared.

On the ground, life was good, too. There were those parties, especially the birthday parties for his daughter and the children of their friends and neighbors—the Ray Millands, the Jimmy Stewarts, the Dick Powells, the Randolph Scotts, the Ira Gershwins, the Ronald Reagans—and often the parents brought their kids and stayed. Life in the early 1950s was ecstasy.

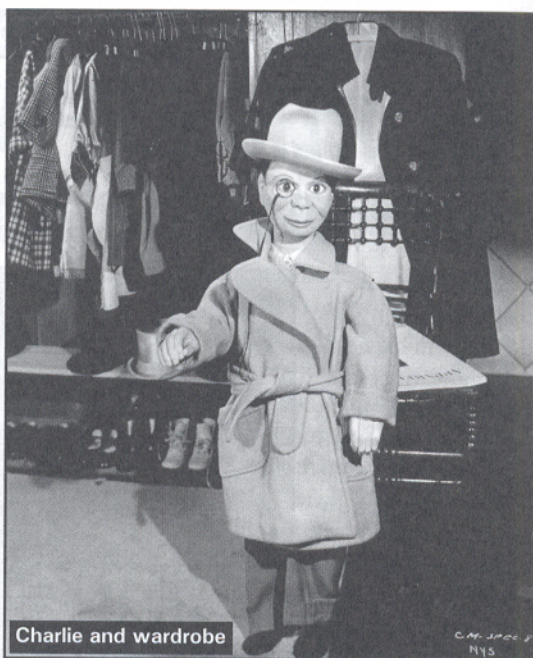
Indeed, it was a long way from the jobs he had after he turned sixteen: stoking the furnace in a Chicago silent-

movie house, operating the player piano and sometimes running the projector. Five years before, when he was eleven, he had found that he could throw his voice, well enough and far enough to get his mother to answer the door after hearing what she thought were visitors outside calling to her. Sometimes even her pies in the oven seemed to talk! He loved doing that, and although she eventually seemed to tire of the games, he never did. He loved fooling

her and playing tricks on other people, too.

Edgar John Berggen was born in St. Luke's Hospital on South Michigan Avenue in Chicago on February 16, 1903, almost one hundred years ago. He attended Lake View and Lane Tech high schools before enrolling at Northwestern University as a pre-med student. He had spent much of his youth, especially the summers when times were tough before and during World War I, on the family's Decatur, Michigan farm. This worked out well for him, in the long run, for the nearby city of Colon, Michigan, was known as the Magic Capital, and so magic became a major interest for the young Berggen (who later dropped the extra g) and it was magic that helped the shy (and some say moody) Bergen to bloom socially.

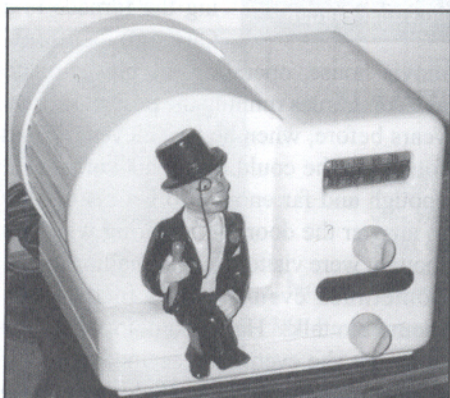
He was in high school when he realized he could get away with saying things through his "dummy" that he would not have otherwise said aloud. Although he was usually a polite boy, he and his dummy spared few targets: classmates (who loved it), teachers, school life in general. He began appearing at amateur nights in Chicago as a "Voice Illusionist." It took a while—years—to perfect, but his skill was



Charlie and wardrobe

so well-honed that he could change voice in mid-sentence or mid-thought (sometimes, mid-word) from a stern Bergen to a naughty Charlie (as he was now named), who did not always mind Bergen and who never minded criticizing Bergen if he missed a word, fluffed a line, or moved his lips noticeably. Charlie, who did not make mistakes, relished such moments!

Charlie McCarthy, Bergen's carved little friend, had a head of pine and a hickory spine. He weighed forty pounds, was a size four and wore 2aaa shoes. Bergen, accompanied by Charlie, usually charged five dollars to provide an evening's worth of magic and ventriloquism. While he was attending Northwestern, after transferring from pre-med to the School of Speech, a gig at a downtown Chicago hotel or prom in the 1920s was five dollars *plus* "transportation" (taxi or bus fare or a ride) to and from the Evanston campus. He enjoyed performing so much, and he was so good, that he decided to leave school and try his hand in show business, performing in



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clubs, in vaudeville, or, as he called it, "the sawdust trail."

After having performed on the fading vaudeville circuit for a decade or more, experiencing some rather lean years in the early 1930s, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy appeared at Chicago's chic nightclub, The

Chez Paree. His appearance there was noted years later in a 1944 Time Magazine article and the event was re-told by daughter Candice Bergen in her 1984 autobiography, "Knock Wood."

Here's what happened: The pair came on stage at 3 a.m. for the last show to a nearly empty room. Charlie turned on Bergen and asked him, "Who (the hell) ever told you you were a good ventriloquist?"



Chase and Sanborn Hour (1937-48)
W.C. Fields, Dorothy Lamour, Charlie, Edgar

He told Bergen to go back to the farm. Bergen blushed and tried to cover Charlie's mouth. "Don't shush me. I'll mow-w-w you down! I'll get by, but you're all through, brother, all through!" Charlie then turned to the stunned customers and told them that they were a disgrace to civilization. The club owners were aghast, but the audience hooted and pounded on the tables, howling, guffawing, and mightily enjoying themselves.

Bergen and McCarthy had turned a corner and there was no going back, so more of the same followed. The pair's reputation grew. However sharp the humor, however saucy the repartee, there was an underlying and overwhelming good feeling about it: malice without malice — a combination that worked.

Socialite Elsa Maxwell invited Edgar and Charlie to entertain at one of her parties. Noel Coward was there and was so impressed with the duo that he recommended them to the management of Manhattan's Rainbow Room, high above Rockefeller Center, where they became a smash in their swank top hats and tails. They were getting up in the world.

A cross-country tour followed, and then a December 1936 guest appearance on Rudy Vallee's radio show went so well that they stayed for three months. By May 1937



Edgar and Charlie and Charlie!

Bergen had a radio show of his own, the *Chase and Sanborn Hour*. The show shot to the top of the Hooper ratings, where it remained for two and one half years and was still in the top five a decade later.

The question "Who would do a ventriloquist act on the radio?" was quickly answered because here, clearly, was something and someone very special. Over the years Bergen presented his radio listeners with some wonderful and outrageous guests and regulars including Nelson Eddy, W. C. Fields, Dorothy Lamour, Mae West, Ray Noble, Don Ameche and Frances Langford, and a dazzling array of movie stars including Marilyn Monroe, Roy Rogers and Gary Cooper. In 1940 Edgar introduced Mortimer Snerd, the unintentionally hilarious rube who, in his plaid suit and pork-pie hat, was loved by listeners for his dim-witted, lackadaisical conversation and demeanor. In 1944 Edgar presented Effie Klinker, the prim and proper spinster eager to scrap it all if she could just find the right man as she claimed, "Anyone will do."

Such was the fame of *The Charlie McCarthy Show*. There were Charlie McCarthy games, Charlie McCarthy hand puppets, bars of soap, coloring books, a Char-

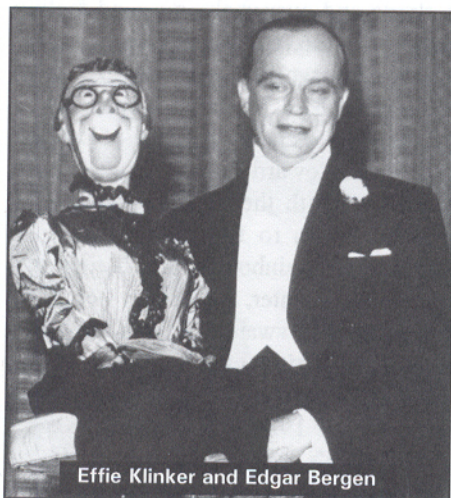


lie McCarthy toy automobile, Charlie McCarthy masks, dolls, birthday cards, an official collectors' spoon, even a Charlie McCarthy Majestic radio that sold for under ten dollars.

When Edgar Bergen was studying at Northwestern, he hadn't exactly been a Big Man On Campus, but the institution, knowing a good thing when it saw one, finally took notice of their star drop-out and saw fit to award Charlie the honorary degree of "Master of Innuendo and Snappy Comebacks," which reads, in part,

Mr. McCarthy has been a student in absentia for many years following a similarly distinguished career in grade and high schools during his youth. He is possessed of a capacity for research surpassed only by his ability to speak for himself; he is known for his wit and wisdom, not to mention his willingness to borrow all his ideas from the person nearest him...

The original degree is displayed at the Museum of Broadcast Communications in Chicago, as are original figures of Charlie McCarthy, Mortimer Snerd and Effie Klinker and other Bergen and McCarthy memorabilia.

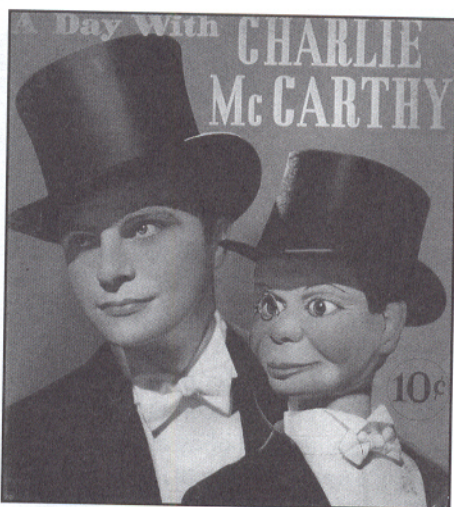


Bergen was on radio until the mid-1950s, a long run by any measure. Over the years, he appeared in a number of movies with his wooden friends, and in 1956 he emceed, along with Charlie and Mortimer, the television show *Do You Trust Your Wife?* Then he (they) began a decade of guest appearances on TV variety shows.

In the late 1930s Bergen had purchased Bella Vista, a white-washed Spanish-style home high in Beverly Hills, not far from the estates of John Barrymore and King Vidor and the home where Katharine Hepburn lived. He invested a large part of his enormous radio salary in California land, and his earnings were far more than what he might have made in medicine. He learned to fly. He bought a plane, the first of several he would own, one at a time, over the years.

He was single, never married. But that changed one Sunday night in 1944 when he noticed, sitting in his radio studio audience, a tall, beautiful girl to whom he was promptly introduced. She was Frances Westerman, a model who, within the next year, would appear on billboards across the country and in magazines as "The Ipana Girl." During that year, Edgar courted her and they were married in 1945. Despite their 20-year age difference, they lived happily ever after. The couple had two children, Candice, born in 1956, and Kris, born in 1961.

By the middle 1970s, Edgar Bergen was



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experiencing some health problems, and so he announced his retirement in the summer of 1978 while appearing at the Brown Derby in Beverly Hills. His last act was to be a three-week run at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas in September.

Opening night was packed, and a star-studded audience included Frances, Candice and Kris, all of whom were concerned about the master's timing, his recently-failing memory, and most of all, his well-being. The routine that first night was perfect, "flawless," and had the audience bellowing with laughter and applauding their favorite lines. Edgar and Charlie were flying! Bergen ended the performance with, "Every act has to have an opening and a close..." The orchestra played "September Song" as he walked off. The emotion in the room and back stage was intense and very sweet.

He did a second performance the next night and it was a flawless repeat. But that second Caesar's Palace show was to be his last.

Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy died in their sleep on October 1, 1978. ■



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TUNE IN TWTD January 25 for a celebration of Edgar Bergen's Centennial.